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12 September 1986

China's Cambodia Policy: Steady As She Goes

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Summary

Beijing's long-term strategy for forcing the Vietnamese out of Cambodia remains based on the three pillars established soon after Vietnam's 1978 invasion: military assistance to the Cambodian resistance, military pressure along Vietnam's northern frontier, and backing for ASEAN's diplomatic and economic measures. But Beijing--beginning with the forced nominal retirement of Pol Pot as Democratic Kampuchea's (DK--i.e., the Khmer Rouge) Supreme Military Commander in August 1985--has made some notable tactical adjustments to blunt Hanoi's diplomatic initiatives, to convince ASEAN and others that it does not seek a return to power of the DK or Pol Pot, and to demonstrate its flexibility on the potential composition of a Cambodian Government following a Vietnamese withdrawal. Beijing has apparently pressured the DK leadership into increased cooperation with non-Communist units operating inside Cambodia and curbed the DK's excesses in the field. Beijing almost certainly calculates that by lowering the DK's profile--without diminishing its fighting strength--the resistance coalition will garner greater domestic

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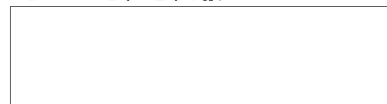
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support in Cambodia and international approval, thereby furthering the goal of convincing the Vietnamese that their efforts to maintain control over Cambodia are futile. [REDACTED]

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CHINA'S THREE-PILLARED STRATEGY

Since its early 1979 invasion to "teach a lesson" to Hanoi, direct but generally low-level military pressure on Vietnam's northern frontier has been an important element of China's strategy for denying the Vietnamese control of Cambodia. Although casualties for the Chinese have occasionally been high, particularly on a remote border battlefield north of the Vietnamese provincial capital of Ha Giang where China presently has some 70,000 troops deployed, this military harassment accomplishes several important objectives for Beijing:

- Daily crossborder shelling and occasional infantry skirmishes compel Hanoi to maintain a costly military apparatus in the north and prevent the Vietnamese from committing significantly greater assets to Cambodia.
- Politically, this strategy helps preserve China's credibility with ASEAN, particularly Thailand, by demonstrating Beijing's determination to maintain pressure on Vietnam.
- Large numbers of Chinese soldiers have received valuable combat experience through the periodic rotation of different units to the border. [REDACTED]

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The Diplomatic Card

Beijing has worked hard to strengthen its relations with the ASEAN countries in order to encourage them to exert constant diplomatic and economic pressure on Hanoi.

[REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] Beijing generally is careful to follow and complement ASEAN's overall lead on diplomatic strategy on the Cambodia issue, at least partly to avoid fueling long-standing suspicion in Indonesia and Malaysia that China has expansionist designs on Southeast Asia. [REDACTED]

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Arming the Resistance

[REDACTED] China provides generous aid to the DK and also provides the majority of arms received by the two non-Communist resistance groups,

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[REDACTED] Most of its aid, however, has gone to the DK, a situation which Beijing justifies on the grounds of the numerical and qualitative superiority of that group to its non-Communist counterparts. Nevertheless, this

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imbalance in aid distribution has fueled concerns in ASEAN that Beijing seeks to restore the DK to power, while its aid to the non-Communist factions has increased concerns that China is gaining unacceptable influence over the resistance as a whole.

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CHINA'S BALANCING ACT

In our view, Beijing will accept almost any governmental arrangement in Cambodia that is largely free of Hanoi's control. We believe Beijing recognizes that its ability to impose its own preferences is sharply limited by such factors as its own unwillingness to take more decisive military action and international aversion to the DK. Beijing has thus found it necessary to take new initiatives in the past year to steer a careful course that clearly shows its strong commitment to sustain opposition to Vietnam while allaying fears that it seeks a DK-dominated government in Cambodia.

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Beijing's fresh series of maneuvers is designed, in part, to inject new credibility into China's assertion that it will accept a neutral, nonaligned and independent Cambodia under Prince Sihanouk. Beijing began by pressuring DK Supreme Commander Pol Pot into retirement in August 1985. According to the US Embassy in Beijing, the Chinese probably took a leading role in formulating the resistance coalition's eight-point proposal announced in Beijing in March, which for the first time allowed for inclusion of Vietnam's puppet Heng Samrin faction in a coalition government. The proposal also departed from previous demands for a Vietnamese pledge to withdraw its forces prior to negotiations. Instead, it called for Vietnam and the resistance coalition to hold negotiations on a two-stage withdrawal. Chinese General Secretary Hu Yaobang publicly endorsed the proposal as fair and reasonable.

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[REDACTED]

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On the battlefield, [REDACTED] Beijing has clearly succeeded in convincing some DK leaders that a united front strategy is necessary, although several DK regional commanders still strongly oppose it. (See appendix). [REDACTED]

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China's successes in moderating DK behavior mark a sharp departure, in our view, from previous years when DK changes (such as abolition of the Kampuchean Communist Party in 1981) were made only grudgingly. [REDACTED]

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Preserving Coalition Unity

Chinese officials are continuing to stress to the three resistance groups that unity is a prerequisite for improved performance and gaining additional international backing. According to the US Embassy in Beijing, they have also implied that greater internal cooperation is necessary for continued Chinese support. These themes undoubtedly were reemphasized in the past few days during the resistance summit in Beijing. [REDACTED]

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But the Hardline Diplomacy Remains

China's hardline opposition to any compromise that allows the Vietnamese to continue to dominate Cambodia remains unaltered. Beijing continues to rebuff Vietnamese overtures to resume talks that were abandoned by China in 1980. [REDACTED]

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The Chinese have also consistently taken the Soviet Union to task for its unwillingness to press Hanoi to compromise. Of the three "obstacles" to improved Sino-Soviet relations cited by Beijing, the Chinese insist that Soviet willingness to terminate support for the Vietnamese in Cambodia is the "litmus test" by which Soviet sincerity can best be gauged.¹ Beijing has been particularly critical of General Secretary Gorbachev for not showing any flexibility on the Cambodia issue in his Vladivostok speech delivered in July.

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Deng Xiaoping dramatized the importance that China attaches to the necessity for progress on the Cambodia issue in his "60 Minutes" interview by offering a summit meeting with Gorbachev if the Soviets would use their influence to get the Vietnamese out of Cambodia.

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OUTLOOK

We believe China's goals and overall strategy in Cambodia will remain unchanged for the foreseeable future. Beijing's initiatives over the past year, however, signal greater willingness to use diplomatic means, if possible, to achieve those goals.

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Even if diplomatic measures prove unproductive in moving toward a settlement, continued stalemate in Cambodia, particularly at the relatively low costs involved at present, is likely to remain an attractive option for Beijing because of the pain it inflicts on Hanoi. An inconclusive outcome in Cambodia will prevent Hanoi from accomplishing its strategic objectives, keep it diplomatically isolated, and divert it from its own desperately needed economic measures.

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From Beijing's perspective, the Cambodia issue also isolates the Soviets in Southeast Asia, limiting Moscow's ability to exploit its foothold in Vietnam. Support to Vietnam also saddles Moscow with a continuing aid burden that is not likely to diminish appreciably in the coming years.

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Beijing, in sum, appears convinced that pressures on Vietnam (and to a lesser extent, Moscow) will, over time, contain the expansion of Soviet and Vietnamese power in Southeast Asia and increase Chinese influence in the region as a whole. Considering the lack of urgency on Beijing's part to

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¹ The Chinese list the presence of Soviet troops in Afghanistan and the Soviet military buildup along the Sino-Soviet border as the other two major impediments to improved relations with Moscow.

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settle the issue and its inability or unwillingness to take more drastic actions, we believe China will remain committed, with occasional tactical adjustments, to the policies it has pursued over the past seven and a half years. 

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Appendix A

The Khmer Rouge: Following China's Lead

The DK over the past year or so has adopted several tactical reforms under pressure from the Chinese to transform the brutal image earned during Pol Pot's 1975-1978 rule. Although efforts at image building are not new within the DK, we believe more pragmatic elements in the group's leadership--including Khieu Samphan and Son Sen, [] see these measures as critical to the long-term political and military fortunes of their organization. They believe that the traditional hardline DK approach toward the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia and the non-Communist resistance holds little promise for the future, realizing that the DK's current military capabilities are insufficient to defeat the Vietnamese. The pragmatists believe their approach will strengthen the DK's overall strategic position. They probably argue that a burnished DK image will increase its appeal with the Cambodian populace, which can be translated into enhanced DK military prowess by improving its support network and its ability to recruit, while exacerbating growing resentment of the Vietnamese occupation. The pragmatists probably also believe the moderate united front approach is the best way to bolster the resistance coalition's international appeal and, thereby, maximize diplomatic pressure on the Vietnamese while improving the DK's position for securing a role in a post settlement Cambodia. DK leaders also are well aware of their pariah status and the widespread fear that a Vietnamese withdrawal would lead to the restoration of the DK. The pragmatists probably contend that if the DK can successfully blur the distinction between the three resistance groups or gain popular acknowledgement of its apparent moderation, it can reduce at least this one concern of reluctant would-be supporters. []

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But not all DK leaders champion the united front approach. [] identifies the leading dissenters as Pol Pot and Ta Mok, who still endorse the DK's traditional strong-arm tactics and probably fear that recent efforts at moderation will undermine their strategic position. They probably believe that as long as Chinese [] support holds firm, the DK can easily remain the dominant Cambodian military force while arguing that cooperation with the non-Communists will only strengthen the non-Communists' hand by helping them gain a foothold in the Cambodian interior to the detriment of the DK. They probably also believe that Vietnam will never relinquish control over Cambodia unless it is forced to do so on the battlefield. The hardliners would contend that offering to negotiate with Heng Samrin and promising him a leadership role only serves to legitimize the Vietnamese-installed regime and results in no strategic gains for the DK. []

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We believe pragmatic elements within the DK will retain the upper hand largely because they enjoy strong support from the Chinese, who have been pressing hard for change. Although Pol Pot remains the most capable military commander and the key architect of the Communist guerrilla effort, the institution by the DK of unprecedented reforms suggest that Pol Pot's stature has diminished. Because he is viewed as a major obstacle to an improved image for the DK, internal and external pressure to limit Pol

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Pot's role in the resistance group probably will intensify and, we believe, will prevent him from regaining his former preeminent position. Nonetheless, the charismatic Pol Pot and his unwavering supporter, Ta Mok, command the bulk of DK forces, suggesting that Pol Pot will remain an important figure. [REDACTED]

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In any event, we see no evidence to suggest that the DK is willing to share power with the other far weaker Khmer elements. Despite different tactical philosophies, defectors report that Communist guerrilla leaders are resolved to destroy the Heng Samrin regime and to drive out the Vietnamese; [REDACTED] the DK then intends to continue the struggle against the non-Communists. [REDACTED]

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Meanwhile, Inside Cambodia...

DK officials are promoting cooperation with the non-Communists to demonstrate resistance unity for the local populace and Heng Samrin's People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) forces, hoping they will be inspired to join the resistance. Several Communist guerrilla commanders, however, say they intend to cooperate with non-Communists only to facilitate DK operations. [REDACTED] The DK also has embarked on an effort to improve its image with the Cambodian populace and has made civilian proselytization a major component of guerrilla operations in the interior. Because local villagers provide intelligence, supplies, and other assistance, developing contacts with them and additional internal sources of support are vital elements of DK military strategy. [REDACTED]

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The DK already is conducting an active interior campaign that we believe will continue over the next few months. Communist resistance forces are well positioned for guerrilla operations with the bulk of their troops already in the interior and an extensive support network at their disposal. They have been active throughout the provinces, targeting transportation routes, Vietnamese and PRK military positions, and local government and economic facilities. They also have launched a number of attacks against major population centers, including Phnom Penh. This high level of activity exacerbates Vietnamese security problems, weakens the credibility of the Heng Samrin regime, and underscores the DK's decided military superiority over the two non-Communist factions. [REDACTED]

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Over the longer term, however, the DK probably will face tougher going. Vietnamese forces available for internal security are stretched thin [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] We judge that Hanoi also has roughly 20,000 additional troops that can be brought into Cambodia on short notice, assuring its ability to retain the strategic advantage. [REDACTED]

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SUBJECT: China's Cambodia Policy: Steady As She Goes [REDACTED]

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